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AUTHOR Allen, Jeanne
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ABSTRACT

Countless reports have appeared during the past decade documenting the United States' failure to educate its citizens. These studies indicate that 27 million adult Americans have left school either unable to read and write, or unable to read sufficiently well to understand the most basic newspaper articles or official forms. These problems have prompted some groups to look to the federal government for solutions, especially increased funding. However, there is no evidence suggesting that additional federal spending is likely to solve or even reduce significantly the number of people lacking basic reading and writing skills. Instead, the way to win the war on illiteracy is to spur action by local communities, private organizations, and state and local governments. The federal government can best help these efforts by coordinating current federal programs, by creating a data bank listing successful local and volunteer efforts, and by keeping attention focused on the problem. In addition, a back-to-basics strategy is needed in the schools, with more emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics skills. Temptations to increase "technology" education and vocational education should be resisted, and phonics should again be taught. Only when the issue is focused on local schools can the problem of illiteracy be solved. (KC)

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ILLITERACY IN AMERICA: WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

INTRODUCTION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Seemingly countless reports and studies have appeared during the past decade documenting America's failure to educate its citizens. Students who cannot locate the nation's capital on a map or are unable to make change in a store are now a common feature of U.S. schools. But even more disturbing are the 27 million adult Americans who have left school either completely unable to read and write, or cannot read sufficiently well to understand the most basic newspaper articles or official forms.

There is no shortage of determination to deal with this problem of illiteracy. From First Lady Barbara Bush, to the chairmen of leading publishing companies, to social service groups and community volunteer organizations, Americans are eager to combat illiteracy. But there is little or no consensus on what they should do. Many social service groups look to Washington for a solution; they want new federal education programs. Mrs. Bush, by contrast, in adopting literacy as her primary issue for the next four years, is stressing the role of communities and individual efforts to overcome the problem.

Resisting Temptation. There is no evidence suggesting that additional federal spending is likely to solve or even reduce significantly the problem of Americans lacking basic reading and writing skills. Washington thus must resist the temptation to "solve" the illiteracy problem by throwing money at it. Instead, it should recognize that the only way to win the war on illiteracy is to spur action by the "troops" closest to the battle – local communities, private organizations,and state and local governments. Washington can help these efforts best by coordinating current federal programs and by creating a data bank listing successful local and volunteer efforts.

In addition, George Bush can take the lead in highlighting the issue, and his Administration can support the research needed to help the search for

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solutions, just as the Reagan Administration led the debate over how to improve standards in the nation's schools.

In this way, each level of the federal system, in coordination with informal groups and the private sector, can be brought together to defeat illiteracy in America.

THE SERIOUS PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY

"Functional literacy" refers not only to a person's ability literally to read and write: it is a broad term covering an individual's basic reading and writing skills and ability to process information and apply it to specific tasks.

Free, compulsory education was originated to make children good and educated citizens by teaching them to read and write and to understand American democracy. Over $184 billion a year is now spent on free public education with the aim of making all Americans literate. But the fact that so many Americans graduate without these basic reading and writing skills points to the breakdown of this ladder out of illiteracy and underscores the point that it may be the condition of education that is the real determinant of illiteracy.

By today's standards, an adult is considered functionally illiterate if he or she has a comprehension level equivalent to the sixth grade or below. Functionally illiterate Americans may be able to read aloud a particular passage, for instance, but they are unable to understand or use the information it contains. This can prevent them from completing the most menial tasks. In a federally funded survey of 3,600 Americans aged 21 to 25, for example, only 27 percent could make inferences from a lengthy feature story in a newspaper.

Eleven Percent Literate. At one time, a simple task such as reading and understanding the newspapers would not have been a serious impediment to employment or daily living. In 1940, to be literate an American normally would only need to complete the sixth grade, and only 11 percent of the population reached that level. But the other 89 percent of the population were not considered a problem because their livelihood did not depend on their ability to master those reading and writing skills acquired after the sixth grade. Most work then was labor intensive and less skilled.

The situation today is very different. Workers now must be capable of using complex technical information and making decisions. Those who cannot pass the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension are considered functionally illiterate and untrainable.

Estimates about the scale of the illiteracy problem are based mainly on 1975 studies, when least one in five adult Americans were found to lack proficiency in day-to-day reading skills.[1] Some analysts claim that the

1 Adult Peformance Level Study, University of Texas, 1975.

problem has deepened since then, with as many as 30 million Americans held back in life by functional illiteracy.

STRATEGIES TO ATTACK ILLITERACY

The federal government for many years has been involved in efforts to educate illiterate adults. Since the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, federal Adult Basic Education programs have emphasized the teaching of basic skills, targeting mainly adults who had not completed or attended school. Local school agencies at first were solely responsible for administering these services in a partnership with the states, but thanks to legislative efforts in the mid-1970s, both public and private non-profit agencies were included in the list of service agencies eligible to receive funds. Today, numerous public and private organizations are attempting to solve literacy problems.

Over $300 million was spent last year on adult education programs funded by state and federal government agencies. This does not include the resources of programs such as the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Job Corps, and other projects of non-profit community-based organizations.

The JTPA and the Department of Education's Adult Basic Education program are aimed mainly at unemployed adults who need to be retrained or taught basic skills to allow them to participate in the work force. In addition, private businesses educate or reeducate adults through job placement programs, retraining classes, company-sponsored literacy efforts, and partnerships with universities that offer courses in basic skills and employment-related training. The City University of New York, for example, runs programs for over 7,000 students at thirteen of its college campuses.[2] These were initiated with the help of business leaders and funds from the New York State Municipal Assistance Corporation, a quasi-government authority.

$25 Billion Price Tag. The private sector is particularly aggressive in efforts to educate the work force, with many employers working with community colleges to provide services to their employees. Xerox Corporation Chief Executive Officer David Kearns, co-author of *Winning the Brain Race*, a book dealing with the schools and U.S. competitiveness,[3] predicts that, if the current situation continues unchecked, American business will have to spend $25 billion to educate each 1 million workers in basic skills. This is in addition to the billions of dollars already spent by firms and the public sector on job training courses at the work place or in community and junior colleges.

In addition to programs aimed at combating adult illiteracy, enormous sums of public and private money focus on high school-aged students who have dropped out of school or are likely to. Dropouts tend to have a much

2 *The New York Times*, September 8, 1988, p. A27.

3 David T. Kearns and Denis P. Doyle *Winning the Brain Race* (San Francisco, California: ICS Press, 1988).

lower literacy rate than the average, even if they have completed two or three years of high school. The main cause of high dropout rates and illiteracy among minority children, say many social service professionals, is deprived conditions at home. Thus, they argue, the best way to deal with illiteracy among these children is to direct more federal services to this population at earlier ages. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that poverty inhibits a person's natural ability to learn how to read. According to current research, the most significant factor linking illiteracy and poverty is the education level of the mother.[4]

There are no data, in fact, to suggest a causal relationship between poverty and illiteracy. While individuals living in impoverished conditions may suffer from a higher rate of illiteracy than other groups, many poor Americans exceed average literacy rates and exhibit exceptional reading and writing skills.

There is evidence, however, that literacy is linked to cultural influences other than economic status. The most important factor, it seems, is the company one keeps.[5] If a child is exposed to adults who take pleasure in reading and to teachers who emphasize good attitudes toward literate activities, the youngster is much more likely to develop good reading and writing skills than children not exposed to such good influences. Thus even children in the poorest schools are able to overcome obstacles and succeed.

THE TYPICAL RESPONSE – MORE MONEY

In response to the clamor over the chilling illiteracy statistics, demands are growing to deal decisively with the problem. During last year's presidential campaign, both major candidates drew attention to the issue. States and localities too are searching for solutions and demanding action from Washington. Numerous "assaults" and "wars" have been declared on illiteracy by politicians and activists from all points on the social and political spectrum.

Thus there is a consensus on the need for action. Yet it is by no means clear that current proposals would be effective. Many groups concerned with literacy seem to expect the answer to come magically from Washington. They ignore the fact that pressuring Congress usually yields hastily contrived and ineffective programs. While Washington should provide leadership in identifying problems and opportunities, answers are more likely to come from those who deal directly with the problem at the state and local level.

More money and new programs also are probably not the answer. No amount of expensive remedial training will stem the illiteracy tide as long as the U.S. maintains an education system that is badly flawed.

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4 Education Writers Association, *The Literacy Beat*, June 15, 1988, p. 1.

5 Frank Smith, "Overselling Literacy," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1989.

Typical of the flawed approaches to reducing illiteracy is the proposal by the Working Group on Adult Literacy, a coalition of social service professionals and organizations. The group is calling on George Bush to earmark $12 million to create a quasi-government institute to coordinate national policy in literacy and to name a Cabinet-level council on the issue. While leadership from Washington is necessary to spur local action, caution is warranted when groups begin to suggest the answers lie in multi-million dollar federal efforts.

Contradicting Business's Views. Even some leaders of the business community fail to recognize the true causes of illiteracy and have joined in the chorus for more federal programs. The Business Council for Effective Literacy, for example, which is comprised of major publishers such as the McGraw-Hill Corporation, claims that all the resources spent for literacy services reach only about 9 percent of those affected by this problem. Therefore, the Council argues, more money must be committed to help more than this fraction of illiterates. One of its solutions would be to provide skills training and vocational training for all eligible adults.

Although the Business Council for Effective Literacy consists of business leaders, its proposals contradict the prevailing views of American business: that firms need workers with a good basic education, not sophisticated vocational training that fails to provide these basic skills.[6] Vocational training is not basic education – good schooling to the 10th grade is.

With nearly 40 percent of 17-year-olds unable to comprehend written materials, and only one-third able to solve a complex math problem, today's employers are forced to devote considerable resources to providing remedial courses for their work force. The concern of employers today is that they cannot use a high school diploma as a measure that the employee is well educated. But instead of demanding better basic education, advocacy groups like the Council are pushing for adult vocational training to remedy the deficiencies of schools.

NEEDED: A BACK-TO-BASICS STRATEGY

The best approach to the illiteracy problem is one that stresses a return to the traditional education methods, such as thorough reading instruction, and extensive preparation in math, history, science, and literature. The dramatic decline in achievement noted by researchers in the early 1980s was attributed

6 A U.S. Department of Education survey of 101 executives from small and medium-sized businesses said they needed employees who could communicate and solve problems rather than be experienced at using a calculator. See also *Building a Quality Work Force*, a joint study by the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor and Commerce, 1988.

to diluted and diffused – or "cafeteria-style" curricula.[7] Students were well prepared in physical and health education, for example, but given little impetus to master math or science.

Proponents of this "Back to Basics" remedy argue that a core curriculum to educate students completely is a precondition to stopping illiteracy in its tracks. They also recognize that other steps are needed. School reform is essential, including competition, or parental choice in schools, and an overhaul of school management, so that parents, teachers, and principals can run schools without interference from distant bureaucracies.

Discredited Premises. A major obstacle to battling illiteracy is the continued influence of discredited premises. Many policy makers, for example, still subscribe to the theory that adult illiteracy is primarily a condition of the impoverished or disadvantaged. The Adult Literacy Office in the U.S. Department of Education even issues reports and studies suggesting a correlation between illiteracy and such societal problems as welfare dependency and crime. Building upon this, many groups have been urging welfare reforms that would emphasize education – including demands for early childhood education and training activities for parents of at-risk youth. The National Governors Association has joined in this campaign, as has the Education Commission of the States, the Committee for Economic Development (a business organization), and many congressional leaders. Some advocate the creation of new bureaucracies to address the problems caused by illiteracy. And there are calls to expand greatly the federal role in adult basic education and training and to mandate state-wide curricula that include skills and vocational training.

States too are being urged to consider requiring vocational and technological skills training in school. These programs, it is said, would help prepare the nation's youth better for an increasingly sophisticated work place. Michigan, for example, is considering requiring schools to devote time to more technical courses, rather than using that time to improve the cultural literacy of students through such core courses as history or geography. Michigan's proposal also would regulate private school curricula to ensure that all schools offer approved courses.

Creating a False Impression. Vocational training is important. It is not, however, the answer to the illiteracy problem. Proposals for more vocational training create the false impression that somehow it is more important to the future work force than is proficiency in the basic skills of reading and writing. This ignores the near universal plea of business that in general it needs individuals with a good basic education and attitude; individuals who can read, comprehend and make decisions, count, and are polite. Given these individuals, business then can provide specific vocational training if needed.

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7 In 1983, the landmark Department of Education study, *A Nation At Risk*, found that achievement was linked to more attention to basic subjects. Modest but significant achievement gains since 1983 have been noted in students who were more thoroughly educated in basics, such as reading, literature, math, science, and history. See *American Education: Making It Work* (U.S. Department of Education, 1988).

Ironically, just when traditional teaching again has been taking hold of the nation's schools, the schools are being urged to switch direction and embrace vocational training, something that very likely will turn out to be just another educational fad. The national assault on illiteracy is in danger of being sidetracked by the movement for "technological literacy." New interest groups are advancing "solutions" to illiteracy that will do little to eradicate the problem, but will add a new layer of courses for students who lack the fundamentals. These groups are not demanding better reading instruction in school or supporting school-based management and other proven strategies to improve America's schools. Indeed, they tend to oppose them.

Bucking the Conventional Wisdom. In Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, for example, where Jaime Escalante attracted national attention for his work with inner-city children, the principal who allowed Escalante to experiment and work with his class has been transferred to a low-level administrative post because he dared to reduce the number of popular shop classes and other vocational instruction, and instead required increased instruction in math and reading.

Similarly, Chicago's now-legendary Marva Collins was forced to open her Westside Preparatory Academy in 1975, rather than fight Chicago school bureaucracies, which would not allow her to explore different instructional methods for minority dropouts. Collins now is teaching the classics to inner city children; she does so with no dropout problem and great academic successes. Had Escalante, Collins, and other teachers who have succeeded in the inner city heeded the conventional wisdom, they would have encouraged their pupils to seek technical training to cloak their weakness in the basics. Instead, they proved through their efforts that at-risk children are not doomed to failure and illiteracy.

Breaking the Language Code. Besides the importance of a good basic curriculum, researchers also have discovered that phonics can help students who seemingly find it impossible to grasp the elements of reading and writing. Phonics is the process of learning the sounds of letters and words. Through this process, widely used in the U.S. until the end of World War II, pupils quickly identify and spell words by their sounds. Phonics experts, like teacher and reading researcher Marguerite F. Hoerl, explain that phonics allows children to break the code of written language.[8] The "dumbing down" of textbooks throughout the 1960s and 1970s, by contrast, taught little about word relationships. Instead, it encouraged rote memorization of words or phrases. Teaching children, by phonics, to decode words is more complex than the whole word method, but it teaches children to read and understand new words.

Phonics instruction is inexpensive and gives children a deep understanding of the English language and an interest in reading. It solves some learning disabilities when introduced as early as kindergarten and helps close the

8 *The Sounds of Reading*, Vol. 1, No. 1, December 1988, Reading Reform Foundation, Takoma, Washington.

literacy gap among ethnic groups. In fact, it represents the very first tenet of the back to basics approach. Yet it also requires teachers to go back and learn to read systematically. Teacher advocacy groups are on record against all these methods. While they want help to solve this problem, they deny responsibility for helping to create it. Simply put, they want money.

WHAT WASHINGTON SHOULD DO

The new Congress is considering a number of proposals to deal with illiteracy. Examples: mandatory pre-school and day care for the educationally at risk; ways to reduce the gap in standards of science education between America and its international competitors. The danger is that lawmakers simply will follow the bad advice of the organizations arguing that new and often questionable federal programs to address such issues, focusing on expensive and sophisticated training, somehow will solve the problem of illiteracy.

Yet illiteracy is caused by poor basic education, not a lack of the latest computer software. This means that Congress and the Bush Administration must focus on strategies to improve the basic education available to Americans. This should require no new federal programs.

As its part in the battle against illiteracy, the Bush Administration should:

1) Order a national assessment of literacy.

Before there can be an effective attack on illiteracy, lawmakers need a clearer understanding of both what it means to be a literate individual and a more accurate assessment of the U.S. literacy rate. Current figures for literacy are based on 1975 data and on Census Bureau estimates, which assume that the literacy rate can be deduced from the number of Americans reaching a certain grade level. The Department of Education immediately should order a study defining the scope of literacy and what constitutes a literate individual. This study must determine the true extent of illiteracy in the U.S. Devising appropriate methods to combat the problem requires knowing the size and nature of the problem.

2) Avoid federal tampering with state and local initiatives.

The Bush Administration can encourage local and state efforts on behalf of literacy by not preempting these efforts with new federal programs. The progress in school reform now being made at the state and local levels is the best way to combat illiteracy; the reforms are increasing local control of education and are loosening restrictions on principals and instructors.[9] More of these efforts are needed, from ridding inner city school systems of bureaucratic red tape to teaching traditional courses and ensuring proficiency in reading and math through high school.

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9 Jeanne Allen, "Improving Education: Lessons From the States," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 670, September 9, 1988.

3) Coordinate existing federal programs.

The Department of Education should maintain a "bank" of information for agencies and organizations seeking to combat illiteracy. The Department should analyze comprehensively existing federal programs on literacy to explore how states may use existing money more effectively with less red tape. Ronald Reagan's 1990 budget wisely proposes $2 million for Adult Education National Program to begin a national programs assessment of adult literacy.

4) Foster volunteer efforts.

Volunteer efforts to educate the illiterate are being undertaken across the country. They have proved effective and should be left free of federal and state regulation. Tutor programs at public libraries, for example, are seeking private business support to ensure their autonomy and flexibility. Business can help these efforts by providing incentives for employees to return to school or enroll in further education. Community and junior colleges should make available low cost back-to-basics coursework for those individuals requiring basic skills education or refresher courses. The federal government can assemble a data base of these private initiatives to guide others launching volunteer programs.

5) Give presidential leadership to the issue.

The White House can direct national attention to the illiteracy problem and to the many private initiatives trying to solve it. The individuals and organizations responsible for making progress in this area should be recognized formally by the White House and publicly commended by George Bush and Barbara Bush; she, particularly, long has been working on the problem of adult illiteracy. The President should mount the bully pulpit to declare a nationwide assault on illiteracy, drawing attention to the constructive solutions underway throughout the country.

CONCLUSION

Partnerships involving educators, businesses, and individuals can reverse the growth in illiteracy. But to be effective, these partnerships must focus attention on the basics in America's schools. The problem of illiteracy will not go away until schools can graduate educated individuals. Illiteracy cannot be defeated if Americans expect businesses, colleges, and other institutions to do the job that should have been done in the schools. Thus although calls for more federal attention to a host of literacy-related problems among adults no doubt will spur interest in the issue, it could divert attention from the main need: forcing schools to handle their own illiteracy crisis.

A taxpayer-supported public education system must be accountable for its product. The Bush Administration and Congress should declare that only the schools can begin to reverse the tide of low educational achievement. Rather than devising new programs to address the symptoms of poor schools, Congress should encourage states and localities to quicken the pace of school

reform. Once the leadership in Washington has defined its proper role in this battle, communities can freely tackle the problems that they face individually. Only when the issue is focused at this level can Americans be assured of a more literate society.

Jeanne Allen
Policy Analyst and
Editor, *Education Update*

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